



**Rebecca Ruvalcaba**

Oral History Transcription

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Interviewed by:	George Garner
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Summary:	Rebecca Ruvalcaba was born in South Bend, Indiana to migrant farm workers. She later served as one of the directors of La Casa de Amistad. She recalls life in South Bend as the West side developed into a hub for Latinos, her time at La Casa de Amistad, and her work with local universities.

- 00:00:01 [George Garner] My name is George Garner, I'm sitting here at the Indiana University South Bend Civil Rights Heritage Center. It is April 25<sup>th</sup>, 2018, and could you just state your name please?
- [Rebecca Ruvalcaba] Sure, my name is Rebecca Ruvalcaba—um Salazar I should say, my maiden name is Salazar.
- [GG] Any relation to Benito?
- [RR] He's my dad.
- 00:00:24 [GG] Oh there you go, I didn't know that, oh perfect! Benito of course is on our list as well. Rebecca again thanks so much for being here, I have a list of questions too but again this can be a conversation between us so if there's anything that you want, let me know. I want people to understand your life history and your life stories so can you just start by telling us where you were—sorry when you were born and where?
- [RR] Sure, I was born November 11<sup>th</sup>, 1972 here in South Bend, Indiana.
- [GG] Yeah?
- [RR] Yeah here on the west side of South Bend.
- [GG] Nice, so where on the west side?
- 00:01:03 [RR] Um, my... I actually first came from Mayflower when—after I was born—um my family still lived on Mayflower in one of the homes of the rancher, which is Schneider farms. So, my mom and my dad from there then moved into Illinois street, just close to Harrison School, just a few blocks from Harrison.
- [GG] Gotcha.
- [RR] Mhm, that's where I grew up.
- [GG] Did your family come—where did your family come from?
- [RR] Well, its particular history, my mom was born in Texas, but she was one month old when they came to South Bend. Her family had already started the migration in regard to farm work from Texas to South Bend. So, she had her aunts and uncles that were already kind of established here and in 1952 her family came over and my grandfather became a foreman for Schneider's farms and so they were able to stay as seasonal works and trans—and I guess started to come out of migrant farm work and became seasonal and he was in charge of the farm.
- 00:02:19 So, my mom in 52 just right after she was born came to South Bend. My dad on the other hand was a migrant worker for most of his youth and

young adult life, so he was born in Arkansas and did cotton in Arkansas and then at 7 years old he moved to Florida and they did flowers and gladiolas, oranges and things like that. So, their migratory was Arkansas and Florida, Ohio, Indiana and back to Florida consistently through his life. It wasn't until he was like 16 years old that his family started—settled here in South Bend, St. Joseph county. Also, at Schneider's farms is where he stayed and so they worked between Martin Glad and Schneider usually, in St. Joseph county.

[GG] I presume you have siblings?

[RR] I do.

[GG] And so where do you fall in the sibling—

[RR] I am the oldest of five. I have three sisters and a baby brother who's not really a baby anymore but—(laughs) So I'm the oldest.

[GG] So your parents were here and then that's when you were born, so then you guys stayed here. So, they were able to make that transition from migratory farm work to—I guess stable farm work here well before you were born.

00:03:44 [RR] Exactly, and when I was born, they had already—my dad had already settled out of farm work, he was working the factory, Steel Warehouse at that time. Had—my mom had graduated from high school at Washington High School on the west side of South Bend.

[GG] Is this the old Washington High School?

[RR] The old—

[GG] On Sample?

[RR] No by that time it was already at—where it's at. Yeah it had already transferred over there. And so, she graduated from there and the day that she married—the day before actually was her last work day in the farm and so from 19 years old is when they got married.

[GG] When did they get married?

[RR] 1971. Before I was born.

[GG] Did you work on the farm as well? Or?

00:04:32 [RR] I did. It was about 10 years old I think was the first time that I worked. I worked in strawberry in Michigan and cucumber. It was mostly because I was kinda asking my dad constantly I wanna go do this, I wanna go do that and he just said, "you know what mija? Maybe it's time that we learn

where money comes from.” And so, that being said he sent me over with my uncle in Michigan because they were still consistently migrant farm working, my uncle and his family. So, I stayed at the farm with them for the summer—

[GG] Made you earn your keep (laughs)

[RR] And kinda learn where money came from, it was hard work—but after that I consistently would do strawberries with my mom and my grandparents, my grandparents worked on the farm until they retired and so anything that I could help them with I just really came to realize the value of a dollar and the hard work that is put into the food that comes to our table and since I was 10 years old I have not stopped working. I always worked. Just in different things.

00:05:52 [GG] So, you were 10 and you wanted to be able to do things with money, for you and for your family what and where did that mean? Did that mean going to places in downtown? Did that mean staying along—cause Western Ave at that point was starting to change too.

[RR] Yeah it was, well the money thing was more about just being able to hang out with my friends, you know, at the beginning. It had been just at that time at La Mexicana, which was on Western Ave, there was just one Mexican store and was able to be able to go in and just buy my favorite candies—Mexican candies or whatever that was or be able to go to a movie with my friends and things like that. But it didn’t stay that way for too much longer, it was about more being able to have some sense of independence mainly because my parents didn’t have the money.

But that being said too, to be able to save, I wanted my car in high school, so I was able to purchase my first car, a Junker but transformed it into something that was just really great with my dad. It was a 68 Plymouth that I purchased with my money and it was because of what I saved and so it wasn’t really about hanging out much anymore, it was about being able to—to be also, also to help because I would help with my siblings in things that they wanted to do. I remember buying books for my baby brother, just different things like that, my sister being able to take her out to have lunch or something like that, just her and I hanging out. So, yeah being able to take care of my family.

[GG] So at this point, you said along Western there’s really only that Mexican—

[RR] Mexican grocery store.

[GG] What were some of the other places?

00:08:04 [RR] There was a restaurant that I remember, which is now—it's over by four winds baseball. It used to be the Coveleski cover on the corner there which is now the Granger community church owns that area there. Used to be a Mexican restaurant in there and I remember that, and they were the ones that gave us permission to paint a mural there. My dad in the 70s with his youth group from La Casa painted this beautiful mural there and I was there when that happened, and I remember that restaurant there.

[GG] Do you remember, I'm trying to think when that mural was painted.

[RR] Mhm...

[GG] 1990s, I think?

00:08:49 [RR] No that was when it was retouched. It was in the 70s, the late 70s when it first was designed and painted, I think it was maybe 78—76, somewhere in there, my dad would know more. The original—and then in the 90s it was retouched, added—we added the farm worker silhouettes on the bottom and that I did with my dad with a friend. But the other parts the whole youth group from La Casa De Amistad from that time—my dad designed it and they went and paint it with donated paint. (laughs)

[GG] And regrettably it was painted over

[RR] Yes.

[GG] In the early 2000s.

00:09:31 [RR] Mhm. So, I remember that restaurant, that Mexican store—there was really not much more then at Saint Stephens was where the mass was for the Latino community at that time on Thomas Street is where everybody would see each other. And I just remember there used to be a gentleman who used to—we have panaderias, we have all kinds of stuff on Western, we used to have a gentleman who used to make bread in his home and then go house to house where Latinos lived and sell from his station wagon. I remember him showing up at our house selling pan dulce at our house and then another gentleman in the back of his truck would come from like Chicago with things that the Mexican store wouldn't necessarily have. But he would come from Chicago in his truck and have just different things that there—like the limes and the nopales and just different things, just more particular.

[GG] Yeah.

[RR] So I remember those things like that, yeah. Mhm.

[GG] I wanna go through your educational experiences as well, so again you were born here—do, so did you... you started school at...

00:10:55 [RR] Um. I went to Harrison Elementary School—actually I started at Oliver and then they—that’s when they started transferring bilingual education and things like that and I went to Harrison. I was in bilingual Ed until 4<sup>th</sup> grade.

[GG] Did you—before you started school did you know English? Where you speaking exclusively Spanish at home?

[RR] It was mostly Spanish at home and then when I started school—my parents were fully bilingual. But my grandparents weren’t so my grandparents lived with us when I was little and so it was mostly Spanish at home. I went into bilingual Ed, but bilingual Ed was different than I remember back then. It was students that weren’t just of Hispanic or ethnic background in the sense of immigrants, there were students in there from African American, Caucasian students mixed with us and we would have Spanish class side by side with our English class. We would have English and then we would have Spanish class.

00:12:17 So, it was more about maintaining our Spanish but having an education, so in over four years that’s what I knew bilingual education to be—it wasn’t about assimilation or having people then learn English to be kind of assimilated into other mainstream into regular classes. So, it was a different type of education that I had in bilingual Ed. After Harrison fourth grade, we transferred to Christ the King school and that because of Saint Stephens was a sister parish with Christ the King and we were given some scholarships for Hispanic students to attend catholic school. Um, and so there was a handful of us that went to Christ the King because of these scholarships and actually that handful of us we were all related. (laughs) And so we were only there—I was only there till sixth grade, I was—

[GG] When did you start?

00:13:28 [RR] fourth grade, right after fourth grade. Right after fourth. So, its fifth, and then half of my sixth-grade year, and then I was brought back to Harrison. It was just too far to be able then to get me there and back home and it was just—there was still a pay that we had to do in regards, and it became expensive for my parents, so we came back to Harrison. Then I finished there, went to Navarre and Washington High School, graduated in 91. When I was at Washington I applied to different colleges, five of them to be exact. I had got help from sister Mary Anne at La Casa de Amistad, I remember cause it was often told to me—not by my parents cause they were so adamant about education.

But just people outside of them, other family members just saying, “there’s just no way you’re gonna go to those schools that you’re applying to like Saint Mary’s, Sandford, Colorado State University, IU Bloomington, and I think my fifth one was Brown that I applied to. And three—four out of the five I was accepted to. But I remember being told that I wasn’t gonna be able to. I was in public education Washington High school.

[GG] Who was telling you that?

00:15:01 [RR] Family members outside of my parents, my parents were the ones just like, “no you can, and you will,” you know. And the people at La Casa being just so supportive and just saying, you know just can’t listen, just for different reasons, I don’t know why they would tell me. I remember an uncle one time tell me when I was applying to Saint Mary’s, “how do you think you’re gonna get in there with being at a public school, being at Washington High School? You know people applying to Saint Mary’s are just, you know, are coming from these elite schools, high schools.”

And so, I got in (laughs) and I started at Saint Mary’s, I was there for a year and a half. I think more than anything I at that time you know you do stuff to prove people wrong and I loved the school, the professors—there was just certain things that it just didn’t feel like home for me and that’s when I went to IU South Bend and I worked full time. One of the things was that I that I never wanted my parents to pay for my education, they just couldn’t.

[GG] And Saint Mary’s is a lot more expensive than IU South Bend.

00:16:28 [RR] It was. Way more expensive. I was there—I got a lot of scholarships at Saint Mary’s, I think I could have finished there and had some debt but not like extreme. With that being said I didn’t want that, you know and like I said it didn’t feel like home and when I applied to IU South Bend it was so much more diverse, much more flexible because I wanted to work—since I worked full time and I went to school.

[GG] Was that difference that you said part of the reason why Saint Mary’s didn’t feel like home?

[RR] I think so too. At the time that I was at Saint Mary’s in 1991/92 it was five percent diversity at the school. That included international students and domestic students, so it wasn’t—

[GG] Basically 95 percent white.

00:17:26 [RR] Yes. And just the socioeconomic too. You know I knew my roommates especially, I had one—three roommates, I could only afford a quad to split the cost in that regards and just knowing that I was there on

financial aid, work study and so I was working on campus, taking classes and it was just so much more difficult but it was obvious of the differences in regards to socioeconomic. Things that I couldn't do and seeing how it was just maybe because of finances.

[GG] And is that what some of your relatives were eluding to maybe? When they were worried—

[RR] It could be now reflecting back on that that, and also because I suffer from dyslexia too and I struggled all through all my school I just, but my mom especially was so there, would sit with me at the—I remember at the dining room, our table, dining room table and she'd sit there, me crying and just doing my work, helping me do that. Tutoring at La Casa De Amistad every single day, staying after school with people who would help me, so I struggled a great deal. I was—I didn't know what was going on.

[GG] I was gonna ask, when did you receive the diagnosis?

00:19:06 [RR] I didn't receive the diagnosis until my freshmen year in college at Saint Mary's and—

[GG] At that time it wasn't as widely thought of particularly in primary schools.

[RR] Exactly. And so I struggled, being able to understand what I was reading, I hated reading and I have—I just remember a memory of my mom in Kindergarten when I used to—when you start writing numbers and letters and things and they saw that I was writing backwards and they said, she's probably, she's not ready yet and so they pulled me out and so I stayed a year behind in kindergarten. But my mom kept me home and she worked with me. By the time I went into first grade, I was doing cursive, I was doing, you know, writing so beyond what my classmates were, that was because of my mother.

00:20:00 Her—my mom and my dad in regard to education, my dad told me when he left me at Saint Mary's, when I stayed on campus, you know, education is something that no one can ever take away from you, once you know something, it's part of you. Its only in time with your old age that you start to lose memory, but there's not one person that will ever take away what you've come to know. So, value the fact that you are here, and take full advantage of what you can, is what he told me. And that stayed with me—stayed with me until today in everything that I do and just knowing that he and my mom were just, as migrant farm workers knew the importance of education and where it could take me.



[GG] Did—at that time too at Washington High School, I presume there were counselors that worked with students to think about various career or college options, do you have experiences with them as well?

00:21:12 [RR] I did, it wasn't a whole lot, it was more with people from La Casa de Amistad that were really encouraging me. My counselor in high school I remember taking a test in regard to, you know, what possible careers you could go into and they were really pushing me towards anything to do with math, because I was really good at math, numbers, more concrete stuff. But I told them I wanted to be—I wanted to study psychology or sociology. I remember my counselor telling me, that's a lot of reading, you struggle with reading and language arts, these are your grades, look at your grades. Look at your testing, your SAT scores that you took. I had horrible SAT scores; I took it three times—

[GG] That may have more to do with the tests.

[RR] Yeah. (laughs) And so just different things like that, but they saw that I was really good at math and art, and so “why don't you do stuff with math”. You know, study accounting or something like that, and I was like no... I may be good at it, but I just don't find it that I'm really interested in it. So, when I went to La Casa, like I said, Sister Mary Ann P (?) was the one that was there at the time at La Casa de Amistad as the director, she helped me a great deal, writing my essays and different things like that and just encouraging me you know? You can do what you want to do, it's just gonna take you a lot longer is what she always told me, “but don't give up on that”.

00:22:43 And so that's what it was, and so when I went to Saint Mary's, I'm grateful for my professor in psychology and she goes, “have you ever thought of this diagnosis?” you know, let's do some tests and stuff like that, “I think you're dyslexic,” is what she told me. It was my professor. So yeah it was my freshmen year there and they taught me how to take notes differently, I'm grateful that my mom made me take shorthand in high school because short hand really helped me in college, taking notes. Color coordinating my notes and things like that. So, it was awesome that I took from Saint Mary's which brought me to IU South Bend.

[GG] I wanna touch on really quickly before going to undergraduate too. So, you had counselors there—at the time at Washington what was the Latinx population like?

[RR] Oh um...

[GG] Numbers wise.

[RR] It was growing a great deal.

[GG] Right.

[RR] Because a lot of families had settled out of farm work already—actually since the 60s a lot of families settled out. So, by late 80s, early 90s it was way more diverse than my mom, I would imagine. It was—I mean I knew all the Latinos in the high school because I had grown up with them. We were all together from bilingual Ed all the way to Washington, so it's not like now and you might walk through the halls and you don't know somebody. But I think it was also with African American communities as well, so much more diverse than it was before. I did know all my Latino community, I would say that, so it was still not large enough to where you wouldn't know somebody, yeah.

[GG] So the counselors maybe putting you in a different direction than what you were thinking but still saying that college was an option.

00:24:49 [RR] Yes, it was mainly because I was in the AP classes, advanced placement classes. So, I was on track for college and how I was from Navarre to Harrison when I did the testing and things like that. Even though I didn't test so high, but I had to take a couple extra classes to get into the AP track and that again was because of my parents advocating. It wasn't necessarily for the fact that, you know, she's super smart so let's put her in here, and really working with me. My friends were—a lot of my friends were in the regular basic courses. I don't remember them ever really talking about college and things like that.

In my class with my friends, my Latino friends, I'm trying to remember who else went off to college besides myself. There was a couple of my friends that went off to tech school, but not like college. After working for a while and after having kids or something like that a couple of my friends have now received their bachelor's degree but right out of high school no. There wasn't—I can't remember besides myself and another of my friend—two others with me that were in the AP track, we all three of us went to college while our other friends went to tech schools or things like that.

[GG] So you earned your bachelor's degree at IU South Bend.

[RR] Yeah, it was in Psychology.

[GG] Can you tell us about your experiences there? I mean I know you shared a little, but I would love to hear you expand on that.

00:26:48 [RR] Um, it was awesome. I really liked it—I know I didn't get involved a whole much in campus life and things like that because I worked full time, but I loved the fact that I had the ability to be able to take advantage of the education process there but also be able to have a work life as well, because I needed to. Not just for myself but also for my family at home, so

that being said, I valued the flexibility of the classes that were offered there. I found that the professors were just so diverse and being able to work as more as a community I remember there that I really valued a great deal. I came to have some really great friends that came out of there just because of being able on the psychology department and so I had some great friends still and that being said I think being able to be part of such a diverse campus really allowed me to be who I was and who I am in essence and to grow in that.

[GG] Tell me more about that.

00:28:19 [RR] I think because I had freedom to express who I was as a Latina, as catholic even and then having friends who, you know, I had a friend who was Muslim and to be able to talk just freely in regards to who we were and to be who we were was just awesome. You know, and to see the diversity in the classroom and just to be able to in my psychology program, it wasn't huge by the time we got towards the end, but we were all from different parts, but with the same interests. So, I think that allowed me to grow and to be able to understand how even though we're different can still be able to work towards a similar goal. Contributing to how I grew up in my own family you know, no matter where you come from, there's still this value of education and I think it contributed to eventually being part of how I would serve in the community later in the diverse setting.

[GG] That's perfect so once you earned your bachelor's degree what happened next professionally?

00:29:37 [RR] Well during—once I finished, I had to finish, or I was gonna be able—have to add on some additional courses because I was a long track there. It took me 10 years, from 91 to the time I finished 2005 to come into getting my bachelor's degree. So, 2005 I finished and that last year I had to leave my job, I was at the prosecutor's office and I loved it. I was a victim advocate for felony cases, and I had been there for five years already and so I came to this point in my life you know, I have to finish or I'm gonna have to take more courses, so I left and took a loan out. It was the first time that I took a loan out since my freshmen year at Saint Mary's and finished. I was married already and after I finished, I then went to work with South Bend Community School Corporation and work with the head start program as a case worker. I was a family specialist, that's what the title was.

[GG] When was this?

[RR] It was right after graduation in 2005, I started that fall, that August of 2005.

[GG] And where were they located at that point?

[RR] Over at Lafayette Elementary school.

[GG] I ask because they were, I think until about 2003 located right across the street from us at the former Hansel Center.

[RR] Oh okay.

[GG] Would have been perfect if you were there at the time, but no I think you were a little bit later than that.

00:31:38 [RR] (laughs) yeah no we were at Lafayette, is where we were and I was given schools in Concord school district, so I would travel to Elkhart every day, had east side and west side. I was there for a year and a half, so it was like January of 2007, that was when I started at La Casa. But I wasn't looking for a job, I felt really good at Head Start, I loved what I was doing, it combined a lot of what I had already did with working 10 years every summer with migrant farm workers and the prosecutor's office.

[GG] Can you go into a little more depth of that work at the prosecutor's office?

[RR] Um, the prosecutor's office, I came in as just working as—on certain cases like misdemeanor cases and just contacting victims, making sure I had their victim statements in and things like that. But it kind of turned into something more right away because of speaking Spanish, especially with—when it came to victims that prosecutors needed to make contact with and get their story and things like that.

00:33:09 I became an advocate for the felony cases, um severe child abuse, domestic violence and homicide cases and so I would sit in court as an advocate with the families in homicide cases. Whatever questions they had I would be there present with them and be the kind—the person that goes in-between the prosecutor and the victims and the witnesses. I was a shoulder for people to cry on when they needed to, I was there as an interpreter as well with the prosecutors when needed from Spanish to English or English to Spanish. The child abuse cases I would work with special victims' unit in those cases and helping with the interviews of the children and also the parents and things like that.

[GG] Must have been very difficult work.

00:34:05 [RR] It was very hard (laughs) it was quite difficult with the homicide cases. I was there when the Janeco homicides happened, it was over by that airport there's a company called Janeco and a disgruntled worker went in and killed some of his coworkers.

[GG] When was this?

[RR] It was right before I left—maybe about 2004 when that happened. It was like a year before I left. And it was quite difficult because it happened and we were called in and so we went into the building with bodies still there, I remember and being asked to go to the hospital—there were three of us, victim advocates and so we were asked to go to different hospitals and then stay there receiving families. So pretty much our job was to go to the hospitals just let them know that we had a list of those that were deceased and those that were injured and which hospitals that they were in.

And so just letting them know where they could make contact and if their family member was deceased, I remember the most difficult part that I couldn't say that—that they were deceased. The only thing I could tell them is just say, "well you know, we're asking families to go gather here at this specific place and there will be people from the prosecutor's office and from the police that will sit with you and talk and chaplains and things like that."

00:35:49 [GG] Why weren't you allowed to say?

[RR] I wasn't specifically because it was a matter of having chaplains present and other people that were—had more training that were able to deal with the emotions that come in through once you inform a family member and so my specific job at that time was to just direct people and that was the most difficult thing. I mean, just that day there was no like, someone to help us through this and—

[GG] Who helps the helpers, right?

00:36:37 [RR] Exactly. And there was no one there, I just remember that and I just home crying and I just remember I was—that day I had, we were getting ready, I was directing a play at the church with the youth and so I went from there to this and I saw the priest that was there and I started crying and I remember sitting kind of in a corner and crying and crying. And realizing that he just didn't know how to deal with it as well and at that moment it was something that shocked him too. And I just remember after that, a year continuing there, maybe a half a year more and the transition of prosecutors that came in and I just said, you know what, I need to finish school, I need more training, I need to understand really how to deal with things, not just for the people in the sense but also for myself is pretty much, that was—who do I talk to, you know who do I, you know. And so that's why I pretty much decided you know, I need to finish, and I was told, "you need to finish" so that's how—

[GG] Then you transitioned to head start.

[RR] Yes.

[GG] Tell me more about the work there.

00:37:55 [RR] It was a—it was called family community specialist, it was case worker in a sense. I had 65 families, mostly Latino families that were in the program in the Elkhart county and I would visit homes, just making sure that the children were receiving everything that they needed and—which is making sure that the family was receiving everything that they needed. If they needed Medicaid, if they needed additional financial support in their homes, it was a matter of making sure that the kids were in safe homes as well, you know. I would do talks with the families once a month for nutritionists and nurses and just people to come in and talk about different things about safe families and how important education is.

[GG] and then in roughly 2007 a job at La Casa De Amistad opens up, a space that you have been to as a child and had guided you, that had tutored you, that had in a mentored you.

[RR] Yes.

00:39:11 [GG] That had been this part of your life and a job opens up to lead it!

[RR] Exactly.

[GG] Tell me more.

[RR] Well, I wasn't looking for the job, they kinda came and found me and—

[GG] Who's they? The board?

[RR] Um the board. At that time—

[GG] Some of the people at that time?

00:39:28 [RR] Jesusa Rivera, Rudy Monterrosa, Margo Demont, Lolita Anastasio at that time was in the transition of um, director. She was there as a transitional director there at that time and so—oh Kevin Shervin was another on the board. So, I had had a conversation with Jesusa Rivera and also Lolita Anastasio that had phoned me if I would apply for the position.

[GG] How did you know... How did you know them? How did you know Jesusa?

[RR] Jesusa just from the community.

[GG] Yeah.

00:40:15 [RR] I had known her for a long time through Saint Stephens at that time and now at Saint Adalbert's and her involvement in the migrant farm workers and different things like that. Lolita was my teacher in elementary school (laughs). She was working for bilingual Ed when I came to meet her and has always been a part of La Casa De Amistad, working volunteer work with my dad and all I remember. So, I had known her since I was a little girl and so when she called me was specifically to say, you know would you consider applying. And I, the first thing I told her, I go, "I'm flattered but no." She gave me a description of what they were looking for and I remember it was at a dinner or lunch for—we would come together for Olga Villa-Parra and Ricardo Parra from Indianapolis.

She had received a reward at Notre Dame, and we were there, and it was a couple of the board members from La Casa and her and they were telling me, but I was like, "no, I don't think I'm qualified for that." And I didn't. I wasn't, to be honest, they were looking for a person with a master's degree, I just barely had gotten my bachelors. Looking for someone with experience in administration and things like that—I had no experience, I was a social worker in essence for years. So, there was things I just and I didn't wanna put myself in that, you know, I just felt it was so much more that was needed that I just did not have.

00:42:16 [GG] Well my understanding and please correct me if I'm wrong, but at the time too, the Casa was going through a very difficult time in its history too.

[RR] Yes. It um, in regards to its debt, programming, just everything was just kind of all over the place.

[GG] Can you speak to some of those challenges?

[RR] Um, I was not aware of the full issues at the beginning in regards to what was going on. I think it was kinda just like, you know, they didn't wanna say too much when I was being asked to apply.

[GG] (laughs) that happens.

[RR] Yeah and so what I knew was from what I would hear and what I saw. That the programming people not really going, it wasn't really present in the community as it had been in years past.

[GG] Why do you think that was?

00:43:17 [RR] Um, I think it has a bunch of different things I think, a lack of what the mission—the mission of La Casa De Amistad, every single director had its own focus of wherever it wanted to go and things like that. I think there

was no clear mission statement and inside of what their programming needed to be focused on, when it came to finances because of the mission not being where it needed to be and how it was bringing about the programming, the finances weren't being met. There wasn't someone there to bring consistency in regards to everything there.

[GG] What was some of the programming before you came on board?

00:44:15 [RR] Its always been after school type of programming but when I came in there was also starting to have program in regards to like English as a new language, we had a GED program, we had a family program and this all came from Olga Eleremar (?) who was brought in as a transitional director to bring about stability and she started to. But she was only hired to be a transitional director, she had no intention of staying there, she was brought in because of Maritza Robles from the bilingual education.

So, she was wanting to be in retirement, and so it came to this point where you know, she brought stability and starting to bring some programming and some funding because—especially from United Way because they started seeing an um—she did some early education stuff with the preschool of “yo puedo leer” there and that was one of the things I think that was just so strong with Olga Elermar. Her history with education of bringing La Casa back to that focus and to that center and that's what I think that helped me once I arrived.

[GG] It made it easier for you to continue that.

00:45:45 [RR] Exactly. So, she had started something to where I could grasp onto and kinda just develop. There was no clear, in regards to, um, you couldn't—there was no measurements in regards to the programs so you can prove that something was working to donors and so the first thing in that first year was just really kinda looking kinda at clear measurements for programs. Why do we have this program, why is it working, why is it not working.

[GG] Right.

[RR] So that first year was just critiquing the evaluation of programming.

[GG] Mhm.

[RR] That I did. And why was it struggling, you know. That being said, I started and that first week was United Way application for funding. I had no history, no idea how to write a grant, no idea. So, I kinda taught myself, in essence.

[GG] You had to.



00:46:46 [RR] And I got help from one of the board members to review my writing cause again I wasn't at all good when it came to that. I signed up for a class at IU South Bend.

[GG] Again.

[RR] Exactly. In regards to grant writing and development and I spent, I remember just months in that, in that class just taking in all the information that I could. Realizing that Notre Dame had, I mean United Way had to be in in a week but in that week, I did something, sent it in and then realized no I need to get trained in this and I did.

[GG] How long did it take you to really turn it around?

00:47:35 [RR] Three years. I had a three-year plan once I saw what was going on, what was not happening, finances and things like that. So, the first year was really looking at programming, it was looking at staff, who did I need to surround myself with? Because I didn't know certain things. Knowing that we didn't have the money to hire really professional people to be able to with us. Who could I ask as a volunteer, who are those people that are there I could probably train to be able to have, you know, a position. So, one of my persons who was on staff there, I needed a finance person. Someone that I could trust and to lead us into helping me understand finances and budgets and things like that in essence.

00:48:33 So, what I did, there was a young lady that was there teaching computer classes, but she was also doing financial education in the evenings like once a month or something like that. And she had a—she had a college degree but not in finances and it was in computer and things like that and so I asked her, I go, “you know you're interested in finances, would you be interested in getting some more training in regards to QuickBooks and all this and helping me out? It would—you would do your computer classes and then part time helping me just with the books and payroll.” Is what I needed someone. And so, she did, we got her training and everything and she ended up there with me until 2006 and she now does financing, she has a degree in financing, and she does financing and budgeting and all for a non for profit in Michigan.

[GG] Nice.

00:49:37 [RR] And so it was something that she ended up liking and got her degree in, in business. And so, like that I found someone that could help me with English as a new language classes, in regards to developing it. Nancy, who's still there and I came in because I needed my staff

[GG] And this is Nancy Flores?

[RR] Nancy Flores. I brought her in originally just because I needed someone to help my staff with their writing in English because I needed the reports to be in English. So, she was helping them with their English, and from that I brought her into the ENL program, to oversee the ENL program.

00:50:20 [GG] How many staff did they have when you came on board?

[RR] Um, there was three, two full time and one part time, which was a computer—and they had a cleaning person that was there part time. So, it was just them and myself. So really just three full time.

[GG] And at what point did you leave the—at what point did you leave that job?

[RR] It was October of 2007.

[GG] Ok. Wait, sorry October of 200—I thought you came on board January 2007.

[RR] Oh sorry I mean 2014. October 2014, I started January 2007 and finished in—yeah... (counting) Yup.

[GG] So basically seven years.

[RR] Almost seven years because it would have been seven years that January, so yeah.

00:51:24 [GG] That's a good time, that's a good yeah, body of work there. and yeah it helped—you were successful in turning them around.

[RR] I learned a great deal. I learned a great deal, I was able to increase the budget from where it was to, it was like 400 thousand, 500 thousand budget when I left, when it was really nothing when we came on. We barely had enough to pay the staff. With that being said it wasn't really about the budget, I remember saying the money will be there if you can provide what the people need. What do the people need? If you provide it well, the funding will come.

[GG] Provide it and demonstrate that you're doing—

00:52:21 [RR] Exactly and it was all about relationship and talking to people and showing them and bringing them to La Casa and to the neighborhood and things like that. And so, we started doing immersion and stuff with Saint Mary's, Holy Cross, Notre Dame and IU South Bend, them coming and seeing and talking. That's really what it was about, just bringing it back—the history of La Casa and knowing when it was my time to leave so that that person to take it to the next level would take it to the next level. And

so, I knew I just couldn't stay anymore, I just didn't know, didn't have that knowledge of how to take it to that next level even though I wanted it so much to be there.

[GG] And now Sam Centellas came along after you to be that next person.

[RR] Exactly.

[GG] So, then you found yourself in campus ministry office at the university of Notre Dame, right?

[RR] Yeah. I am right now.

[GG] Right.

00:53:29 [RR] In that transition from La Casa was discerning a master's program which brought me to Notre Dame. I was thinking about the MNA, the masters of nonprofit administration to continue my work at La Casa. But that being said I started to get more involved at Saint Adalbert's in regards to ministry work over there.

Um, and doing formation stuff with adults, spiritual formation, but again it came a point where I said, wait a minute I need to know more. The same thing that happened with the prosecutor's office, them wanting to me to finish school brought me again—like, I can't continue doing this and the parish priest was asking me to do more but I just realized I need to know what I'm actually forming people for. What is the understanding of the church and things like that. So, I went into looking into theological studies and it brought me to Notre Dame's MDIV program. And—

[GG] Masters of Divinity.

00:54:37 [RR] Masters of Divinity and talking to the director, Monsignor Hynes (?) who was at Saint Matts at that time and he said—

[GG] Saint Matthews?

[RR] Um, yes, Saint Matthews Cathedral. So, he was there at that time and my pastor said, why don't you go talk to him, sit with him and I talked to him and I told him you know, but I'm also thinking about the MNA and I've interviewed with them. But something in my heart is saying you know, this needs to be more important for you right now.

[GG] I wanna ask what that thing in your heart was, cause you talked about going to Saint Stephens and some of the community events they did as a kid, going to Saint Adalbert's. So, it's clear that church has always been with you in your life and I'd love for you to speak more to what it

meant to you and what some of your experiences with the churches here were. And leading up to what your chosen career is now.

00:55:38 [RR] I think more than anything my life and my faith life has never been disconnected from my family life and my work life. It's always been connected. And that was because of how my parents again how they raised us, that everything we do in this world is because we've been called to do it for a greater good and not for ourselves. And so, as a kid being raised in this family and at Saint Stephens it was about watching my parents involved with La Casa de Amistad, which was part of Saint Stephens, came out of Saint Stephens and the youth groups there and how he worked with the youth. How my mom's by his side, singing at mass and we—I played the drums, I played the congas, you know in the church choir.

00:56:41 Going out to the nursing homes and singing at the nursing homes but at the same time too knowing where you came from. Going to the migrant fields you know, being part—my dad being part of the Cesar Chavez movements in the 70s with the no grapes campaign and knowing about that and having pride in that. So, it was all connected, my faith life, my church life was my family life, it was my work life, everything that I did and have done has been for the fact of how can I be able to contribute to someone else's life and making it better. For my work as a consolidator we were outreach project for the migrant program every summer to the prosecutor's office to the Casa De Amistad, head start, every single one of those jobs had been more than a job.

00:57:43 It's been about what my dad would call your vocation and your mission in life, and so that's how my church life has always been important and living out what it is that we're called to live out by God. To live in the likeness of Christ in the word and that being said, coming to saint Adalbert's and being at La Casa and becoming into more service in the parish and helping people understand that for themselves, not just that it's for themselves but for the greater good. The social justice focus that has always been a part of my life but also part of the church itself and the work that its done and continues to do I think was what really made my heart move. And I knew there had to be more because I could feel it. I started feeling okay my work at La Casa is coming to an end, someone else has to be here. I told the board that.

00:58:57 I remember telling them that, I just feel like you know, this is coming to an end here and I just need to let you know what I'm feeling, I'm looking at schools and programs, I don't know yet, but I'll let you know once I know. So, I looked at these two schools, talked to the people and decided after those talks that it was the MDIV program, the masters of divinity program

that my heart was being pulled more in that direction. Knowing that it would never be disconnected fully from the work of the community, that it can only be enhanced. Um, Monsignor Hynes suggested me taking a year of studies at Holy Cross so I went while working full time at La Casa, I did two classes each semester at Holy Cross College in theology, just to have a sense of what it is all about. I never had taken theology courses except at saint Mary's I took one scripture class but, um so to kinda see what the work is all about and see if that was really where I was being called.

01:00:12 Then I remember clearly just one day after my first semester of studying at Holy Cross I was getting ready for work, I was in the shower and all I heard, "its time" is what I really heard. People think it's strange at times when I say that, but I knew what it meant and I went in and I contacted my board and at the next board meeting I said its time, you need to start looking for someone. I won't be here next year and for these reasons. I think La Casa is coming into a transition, I don't think I'm that person for that, I'm coming into a transition in my life where I'm discerning that I'm being called in another direction and I need you to listen to that as well.

01:01:06 And so, yeah, that's how it started, and I applied for the MDIV, was accepted at Notre Dame and I worked the first semester still in the transition with Sam till October, so, I was already in my MDIV program two months in—two and a half months when I finally left La Casa in that transition with Sam.

[GG] I'm even thinking of when you were talking before about being a student at IU South Bend and being among the things you felt free to be there is being Catholic too. Does that mean that there were times when you didn't feel that freedom or feel that open?

01:01:52 [RR] There have been different moments and different moments through the whole time of—I knew a way of living my faith, my Catholic faith in a different way than when I went to Saint Mary's. It was really different, and I don't know if I can explain that, just in a sense that—I knew it more in this hands-on way that my parents showed me. Being with the people, not just praying but working and loving, in that way. And then when I went to Saint Mary's its Catholic faith but expressed in a different way, way more, you know, I wouldn't say rigid or anything, but it has its—it's still beautiful but not the way that I was able to feel at home in it.

Or even though IUSB is not a Catholic university, but it allowed me to be able to live my faith through the loving of different people in different ways, you know. Being comfortable in my possible in my nothingness when it came to my socio-economics status. Also in the sense of even my studies and since there was a transition there that because of coming into an elite place where I felt like I knew I was different, I knew I was a minority, I

knew I didn't have—to then being able to transform and say, it's okay that you don't have this, you're still part of a real body, you know, community and so I think that's what it was too. Even though it wasn't a Catholic university it still allowed me to live out my Catholic faith fully, which was interesting.

[GG] Were you there when Saint Stephen's closed?

[RR] Yes.

[GG] What was that like?

01:04:20 [RR] It was so hard. Growing up in a place where you have a sense of home. The community had migrated already, this was the third home in essence for the Latino community and to be there already at a longer period of time of 30 years or so, then to say, "hey we have a new home for ya, and you didn't have a decision." (Laughs)

[GG] So Saint Stephen's was the third you're saying?

[RR] It was the third.

[GG] What were the first two?

01:04:55 [RR] The first one was at Saint Stanislaus in New Carlisle and then from there moved to Saint Mary's of assumption which was no longer—it was on Locus road and then from there it was Saint Stephens, they moved to Saint Stephens in the early 70s/ late 60s maybe or at least 70s.

[GG] And then Saint Adalbert's.

[RR] And now Saint Adalbert's, 16 years that we've been there. So, they've been difficult transitions, my mom has lived every single one of the transitions and she says you know, we will always be migrants even in a church.

01:05:38 [RR] Is what she said. She lived through all the transitions and is still at Saint Adalbert's with us. I only transitioned from Saint Stephens to Saint Adalbert's and knowing a home all my life over there and then coming over here was difficult. Like I said, mainly because we didn't have a say in that, it was a decision that came from the diocese office. Our Parish Priest didn't have a say in that, you know.

[GG] Why do you think they made that decision?

01:05:59 [RR] I think it's not just in this—for Saint Stephens but in the church's transition, you know having so many churches, not enough priests, there had to be mergers that had to be made, there had to be decisions that had

to be made. Saint Stephens was a church that needed a lot, a lot of work, just structurally. It didn't have a school connected to it and so we had a lot of parishioners, Latino parishioners, lot of children but there was no school connected to it, to where Saint Adalbert's did.

Physically stability, a decrease number of Polish Catholics in the community, but it had more stability that it could offer, and we had a growing community that needed a good home, in essence. But we—I didn't understand that at the time, I understand it now. I understand it now. At that time, it was about someone taking away a home, in essence. Where you just started finally to feel as part of a—the community, the Catholic community. Because again, we had been in transition before, so it was difficult in that sense.

[GG] Is there anything that I didn't ask that you feel is important, that you feel that I might have missed?

01:07:40 [RR] Mm, no I think, I think that just in essence it's just about my life, my history has been about trying to live through what my call is, you know. How my family has influenced that, how my community has influenced that, my faith has influenced that, to be able to be in the place that I am now, which is at campus ministry working with the young adults that come from all over the place. I never imagined to be there. My ideal was to get my MDIV and go back home to my parish community, but God has his plans always (laughs). Always. It's just a matter of being able to discern them and listen.

[GG] And hear it.

[RR] Yes. Mhm.

01:08:40 [GG] I did have one other—one last question too because throughout your life from elementary to high school, even to undergrad you're juggling school and work and then your early years juggling school and farm work. Can you just talk about what your day would be like on, during the school year what would that mean? You said you started on farm work around age 10 if I recall?

[RR] Mhm.

[GG] So what would that day look like for you?

[RR] Well that farm work was mostly in the summer. During the school year I would work but it wasn't in the farms. I had just other jobs like at La Casa they hired me as helping the cleaning lady.

[GG] You really have worked there for a long time.

01:09:25 [RR] Yeah. At Notre Dame I worked in the mailing with Olga Villa-Parra when she was there during the school year. So, it was a matter of—it was mostly weekends that my parents allowed me because school was the one thing that was really important. My farm work was early, it was 5 in the morning until sunset. I was 10 years old, I would fall asleep a couple times in the rows of the strawberries. My uncle would kinda “where’s Becky at?!” (laughs) I was asleep. He caught me a couple times that way. So yeah, it was mostly summer, it was hard work. I remember the cucumbers was the hardest, strawberries was hard on the back, it was being bent over and I had an older cousin that would carry the stuff for the strawberries.

But the cucumbers was buckets and so I couldn’t—the gloves were too big. I remember to grab the cucumbers—so it was mostly by the hands or using my shirt to grab them because the—they would poke, and the buckets were big white buckets that you would fill and so I couldn’t carry them, so my job was just to fill them while my cousin lugged them. I didn’t last too long in cucumbers, it was really a short time, because then I went back home, and it was mostly just strawberry that I did. Growing up working during the schoolyear it was just the weekends, I just had these jobs that I would do on the weekends, Friday, Saturday, Sunday mostly.

01:10:55 My dad always said, there’s three things that you have to do, do well in school, you know, that’s your job. Figure out—do something in the community, whatever that might be, in the church you know and then have a sport or something that you’re involved in through school. Those were the three things he wanted us to do. So, the fact that I had a job was in addition to what he really wanted, and it was only to go to my uncles to show me, it wasn’t even for me to stay the full summer. He wanted me out there just a few weeks, but I think I right away realized that—how important this was so I ended up sticking up the summer out there as much as I could and then coming home. But it wasn’t meant for that, I don’t think, in that way.

[GG] That its good advice from your father.

[RR] It was. (Laughs)

[GG] Rebecca again, thank you so much.

01:12:07 [RR] No thank you.

[Audio ends]